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ABSTRACT

To further particularize differences between rejected and neglected children, 196 adolescents enrolled in 7th, 8th, and 9th grades were identified by their peers as "populars," rejected "unpopulars," and neglected "unknowns." The students were also compared on (1) psychological assessments of self-esteem, loneliness, and sense of belonging, and (2) cognitive variables of intelligence quotient (IQ), achievement scores, and grade point average. Planned contrasts between each of the groups showed that rejected and neglected children were significantly more lonely than popular children, but the groups did not differ on self-esteem. Both rejected and neglected students felt significantly farther from the center of school than did popular students. No significant difference was found between groups on their desire to be closer to the center. No significant differences were found between the three groups on IQ or achievement scores. On grade point average, however, rejected students were significantly lower than the neglected or popular children. In this sample, rejected and neglected adolescents seem at risk on emotional dimensions of loneliness and sense of belonging. Rejected students were at risk academically, as reflected by grade point average. (Author/RH)

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Comparisons of Rejected, Neglected and Popular Adolescents
on Psycho-Social And Cognitive Variables

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April, 1987

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ABSTRACT

Research findings reporting important differences between rejected and neglected children on several psychological and behavioral variables suggest a need to increase our understanding of these groups in adolescence. In the present study, 196 adolescents (grades 7-9) were identified by their peers as "populars," "unpopulars" (rejected), and "unknowns" (neglected) and compared on psychological assessments (self-esteem, loneliness, sense of belonging) and cognitive variables (IQ, achievement scores, grade point average). Planned contrasts between each of the groups showed that rejected and neglected were significantly more lonely than populars, but the groups did not differ on self-esteem. Both rejected and neglected students felt significantly farther from the center of school than did populars. There was no significant difference between groups on their desire to be closer to the center; all wished to be close or closer to the center. No significant differences were found between the three groups on IQ or achievement scores. On grade point average, however, rejected students were significantly lower than the neglected or populars. In this sample, rejected and neglected adolescents seem at risk on emotional dimensions of loneliness and sense of belonging. Additionally, rejected students are at risk academically as reflected by grade point average.

INTRODUCTION

Studies of children's peer relations report rejected and neglected children differ on a number of psychological and behavioral variables: rejected children have been found to be more aggressive, more disruptive and less prosocial than neglected children (Cole & Kupersmidt, 1983; Ladd, 1983; Newcomb & Bukowski, 1984). Research also suggests that the rejected children constitute a group of children at risk regarding their social and emotional well being. The at-risk qualities of the neglected group are less clear (Asher & Dodge, 1985).

Most studies of neglected versus rejected children have focused on elementary-aged children. Although Brown and Lohr (in press) found rejected and neglected groups among adolescents, few studies have concentrated on the two groups in adolescence or compared them with their popular peers. Nor has the research reported differences among these adolescent groups regarding intellectual ability, achievement scores and grade point average, data which would help explore the extent to which the groups differ by being at risk academically.

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which early adolescents would be seen by their peers as belonging to groups which could be identified as popular, unpopular or neglected and then to investigate the degree to which distinct profiles emerged for each group on self-report variables and on academic variables available from the school. The study compared junior high school adolescents identified by peers as rejected, neglected or popular on psycho-social variables (self-esteem, loneliness, sense of belonging) and on cognitive indexes (IQ, achievement scores and grade point average).

METHODOLOGY

The sample consisted of 196 junior high school students (grade 7-9) from a midwestern community where the majority of the population is Caucasian and middle to upper class. Students were identified using a modification of Schwendinger's (1985) procedure for identifying peer groups. Pairs of students representing all major school crowds were interviewed to create an empirical portrait of the school society. Student pairs identified and described the major crowds they perceived in the school. Then, using a typed copy of the class list, pairs indicated the group to which they believed each student in their grade belonged. Interviewing continued until representatives of all major crowds had participated and information became repetitious (an average of 20 pairs per grade). The strict confidentiality of responses was stressed at the beginning and end of the interview.

Each student in each grade was assigned to one of the groups when 50 percent or more of the pairs placed him/her in the same crowd. Students not known by 50 percent or more of the pairs were identified as unknowns, on the basis of this information and the descriptions of these students by those who knew them, the unknowns were identified as neglected students. Across grades, major groups included "unpopulars" (rejected), "unknowns" (neglected), and populars.

Following assignment to crowds, students were selected at random from major groups to respond to self-report assessments of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) and loneliness (Asher & Wheeler, 1985) and questions regarding how close they felt to the center of school life and how close they would like to be (Coleman, 1961). IQ scores, achievement data and grade point averages were provided by the school. It was hypothesized that populars would be significantly more healthy socioemotionally and academically than either rejected or neglected students and that neglected would be significantly more healthy socioemotionally and academically than the rejected. Analyses of variance (ANOVAS) and planned comparisons were done to test the hypotheses.

RESULTS

Planned contrasts between groups across grades showed that both rejected and neglected students were significantly more lonely than populars. Rejected and neglected, however, did not differ significantly from each other in reported loneliness (Figure 1). Groups did not differ significantly on self-esteem, but sex differences in self-esteem showing girls across all groups having significantly lower self-esteem than boys replicated others' findings of sex differences on self-esteem in early adolescents (Simon, Brown, Bush & Blyth, 1978).

On Coleman's (1961) question regarding how close students felt to the center of school life, groups again differed significantly. Both rejected and neglected students felt significantly farther from the center of school than did populars (Figure 2). Groups did not differ significantly, however, on a second Coleman question assessing how close they would like to be to the center of school life. All groups wished to be close or closer to the center (Figure 2).

Analyses of variance (ANOVAS) were done to compare the groups on IQ (Henmon-Nelson Group Test), achievement (California Achievement Test) and grade point average (a 16-point scale). No significant differences were found between the three groups on IQ or achievement test scores. On grade point average, however, rejected students were significantly lower than the neglected or popular groups (Figure 3).

DISCUSSION

Findings support the need to recognize the distinction between rejected and neglected groups in adolescent populations as well as in those of younger children. While showing similarities, the groups in this sample produced distinct profiles. The profile for rejected students was especially consistent with results from studies using rating and behavioral observations. When describing rejected students' behavior, peers referred more frequently to antisocial behavior, such as starting fights or getting in trouble in class. Neglected students, on the other hand, had low visibility and in fact were not known by a majority of peer leaders. Those who knew them frequently described them as "quiet."

Findings on self-reported loneliness replicated only in part the research results of others. Asher and Wheeler (1985) also found that rejected children were significantly more lonely than popular children. Their finding that neglected children did not differ significantly from higher status peers on self reports of loneliness was not replicated here, however; neglected students in this case also reported feeling significantly more lonely than their popular classmates. Perhaps increased awareness of peer groups in adolescence accentuates the sense of isolation for both rejected and neglected students in junior high school.

Results of the question regarding the students' sense of closeness to school life paralleled the findings on self-reported loneliness. Rejected and neglected students both felt significantly farther from the center of school activities than did popular students. This suggests that both neglected and rejected adolescents

experience a sense of alienation from the mainstream of school society. Both groups of students in this study were cognizant of their relative position in the peer society.

Groups did not differ on their desire to be closer to the center. All three groups indicated that they wished to be closer to the center than they were. The desire of rejected and neglected students to alter their status may indicate that these early adolescents would respond positively to interventions directed toward affiliating them more closely with the school system and its society.

The finding of no significant difference between the groups on self-esteem was surprising. This may be explained in part by the fact that in this sample the self-esteem of the populars was lower than expected, thus bringing them closer to rejected and neglected students on this scale.

While research has suggested that rejected children may be at risk psychologically and emotionally, findings here suggested that rejected students may also be at risk academically. As reflected in a lower grade point average, rejected students differed significantly in school performance from their popular counterparts and from the neglected students. Neglected students, however, did not differ significantly on grade point average from their popular peers. Greater success in academics by neglected students may contribute to mitigating other at-risk factors where these students are concerned.

It is important to note that differences in performance cannot be attributed to ability or to measured achievement in this sample. Neither rejected nor neglected students were significantly below the popular students in ability or in achievement as measured by standardized group tests. Nevertheless, the rejected students had a

significantly lower grade point average than either the popular or neglected students. Rejection by peers may result in a sense of alienation from the school system and its goals and objectives, and the rejection pattern may affect academic as well as social success.

The hypotheses of the study were only partially supported. Populars were less lonely and saw themselves as closer to the center of things than either rejected or neglected. However, there were no significant differences between the rejected and neglected on any socio-emotional variables. On educational variables, the hypotheses were supported: Both the populars and neglected students had significantly higher grade point averages than the rejected. Rejected students may be both emotionally and academically at risk within the school system, but feelings of loneliness and distance reported by neglected adolescents may indicate an increasing emotional at-risk factor for these students as well as they grow older. Further research, including longitudinal studies, is needed to elaborate upon the differences between rejected and neglected groups in adolescence.

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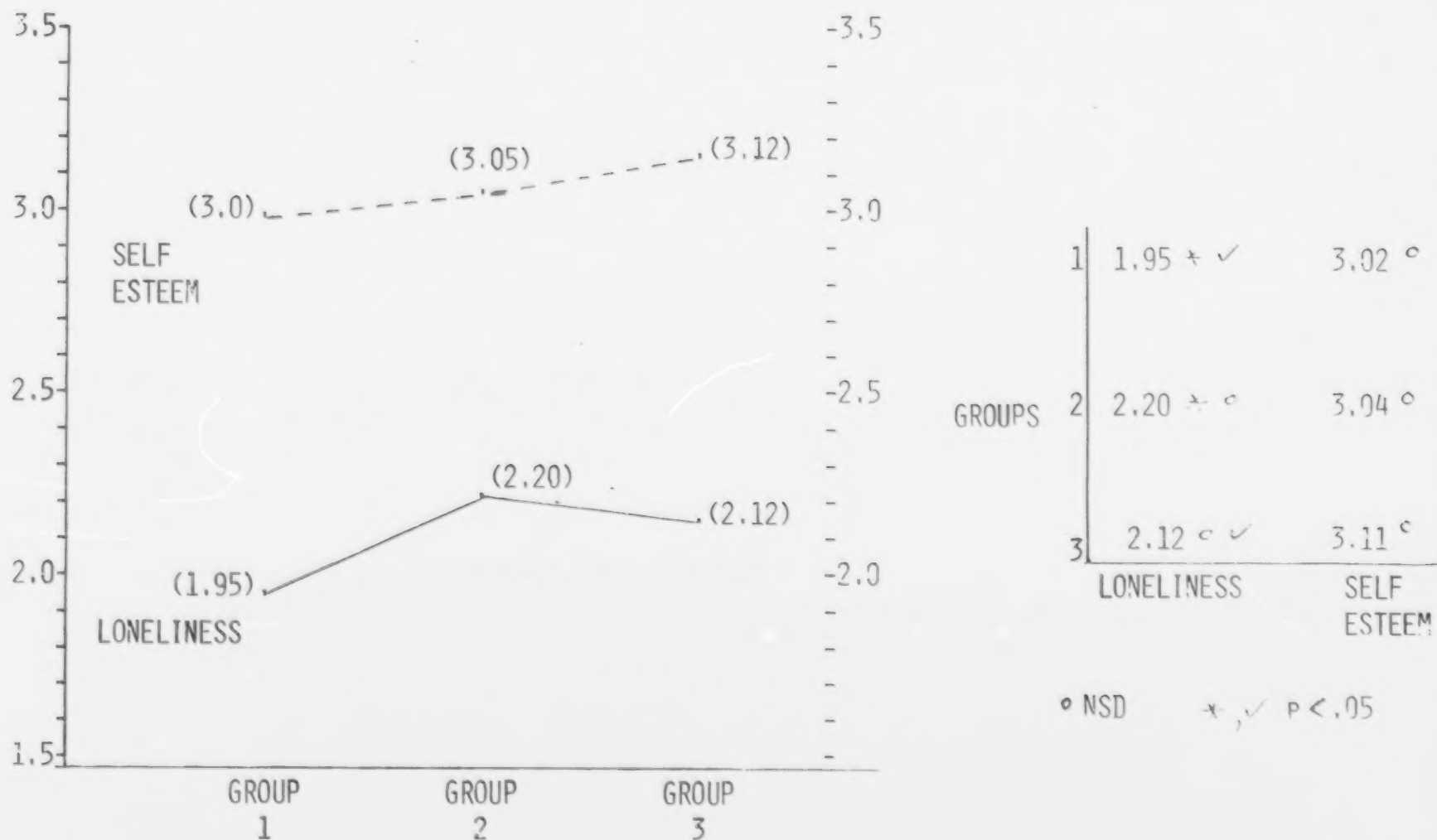


FIGURE 1. A COMPARISON OF POPULAR (GROUP 1), REJECTED (GROUP 2), AND NEGLECTED (GROUP 3) STUDENTS ON SELF-ESTEEM AND LONELINESS (HIGH SCORES = MORE SELF-ESTEEM AND MORE LONELINESS).

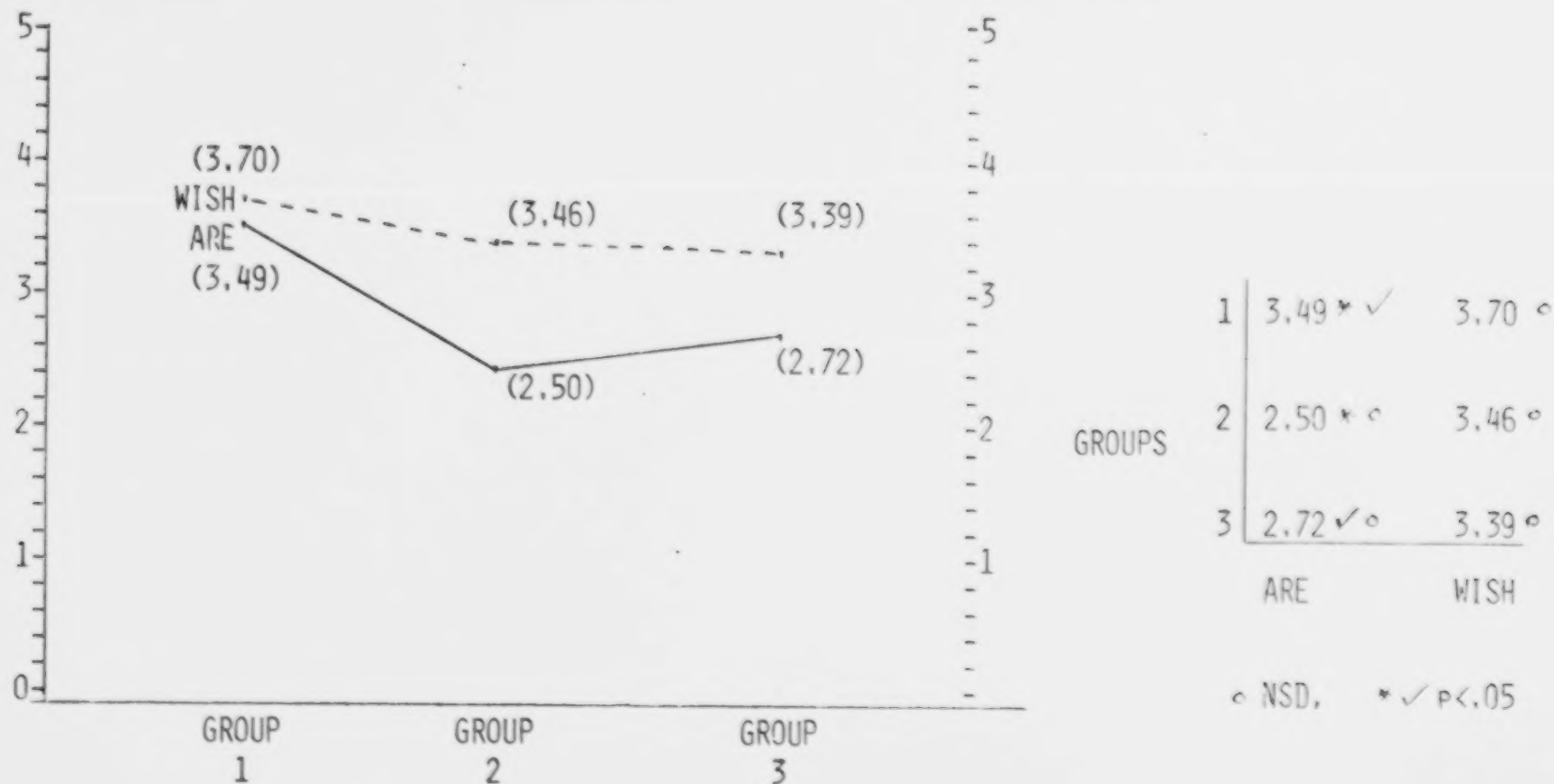
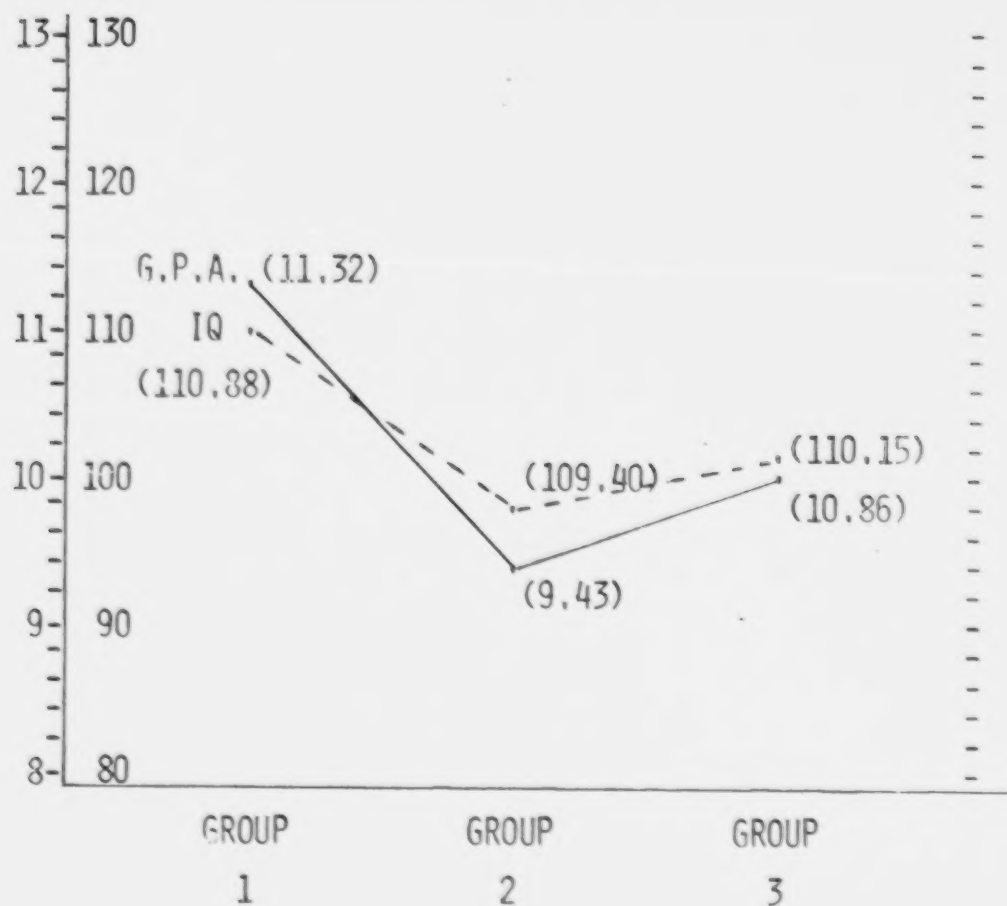


FIGURE 2. A COMPARISON OF POPULAR (GROUP 1), REJECTED (GROUP 2), AND NEGLECTED (GROUP 3) STUDENTS ON THEIR PERCEIVED STATUS (ACTUAL/ARE) AND RELATIVE DESIRE (WISH) TO BE IN THE CENTER OF THINGS AT SCHOOL.



GROUPS	1	110.88 °	11.32 ° *
	2	109.40 °	9.43 * ✓
	3	110.15 °	10.86 ° ✓
		IQ	G.P.A.
		° NSD, * ✓ P < .05	

FIGURE 3. A COMPARISON OF POPULAR (GROUP 1), REJECTED (GROUP 2), AND NEGLECTED (GROUP 3) STUDENTS ON IQ AND GRADE POINT AVERAGE.

(HENMON-NELSON GROUP IQ) (G.P.A.=16.0)